

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Polish Standards of Politeness

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#### 12.1. Introduction

As Larzen-Ostermark (2008: 536) claims one cannot underestimate “the importance of learning about and knowing your own culture” as it is a prerequisite for relating it to the foreign culture. “Awareness of one’s own cultural background is considered an inevitable basis for more or less conscious comparisons that the students will make when encountering other cultures”

Our research has been designed to answer questions asked by one of the Ukrainian students taking part in the project:

- a. What is considered impolite or unacceptable to say or to do in Poland?
- b. What can make Polish people feel uneasy or offended?

Since the question refers exclusively to behaviour, we decided to focus on the “little c” culture defined as: “the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people which results in characteristic behaviours” (Durocher 2007: 145). In order to find a reliable answer to the above questions, we designed two questionnaires meant to investigate Polish people’s beliefs concerning unacceptable behaviour.

#### 12.2. The Design of the Questionnaires

Two separate questionnaires<sup>1</sup> were designed – one for Polish people and the other for foreigners – in order to compare Poles’ beliefs concerning unacceptable behaviour with the first-hand experience of foreigners coming to Poland. The questionnaire for the Polish people was meant to:

- check their attitudes and reactions to faux pas made by foreigners
- find the answer to the question: Do Polish people have a tendency to criticise their country? What is their reaction if foreigners do the same?
- compile a list of unacceptable instances of behaviour
- find out what is the general attitude of Polish people towards foreigners coming to Poland
- check how respondents evaluate a set of statements concerning behaviour included in the Polish questionnaire.

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<sup>1</sup> For questionnaires see Appendix I and II.

**Table 1.** Age groups.

Age group	Number of respondents
16–20	45
21–30	30
31–50	13
50+	13

### 12.3. Participants

The questionnaire for Poles was distributed among 101 subjects (79 women and 22 men). Age categories were introduced in order to check if there are any differences concerning the perception of the standards of politeness among people of different age. Table 1 shows the distribution of the subjects in the age groups.

Questionnaires were distributed in Kraków and Skoczów (a small town in southern Poland), among people coming from different walks of life; the choice of participants was random.

The questionnaire for foreigners was distributed in Kraków among exchange students learning Polish and foreigners working in Poland. Although a substantial number of questionnaires were distributed, unfortunately only 17 were returned. Eleven countries were represented (Belarus, Canada, China, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Tunisia, Ukraine, and the USA).

### 12.4. Results

*Do Poles have a tendency to criticise Poland? What is their reaction if foreigners do the same?*

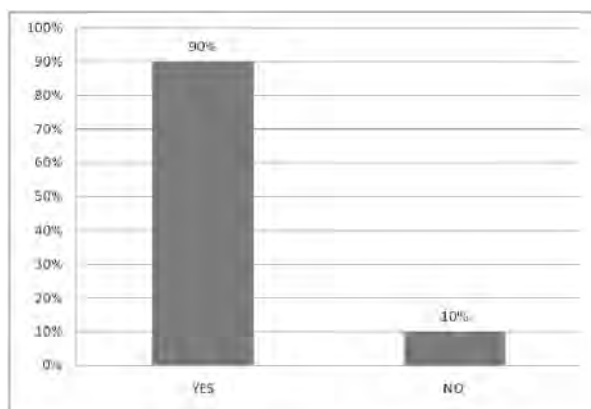
Polish people are believed to have a tendency to criticise their country. The hypothesis was that, although it is acceptable for Poles that their fellow citizens criticise Poland, they feel offended when foreigners do the same.

The results proved that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (90%) admitted to criticising Poland (see Fig. 1). However, their attitude concerning this matter is not so straightforward. Opinions vary significantly; 31% claim that the tendency to criticise is something natural for the Polish, whereas 24% find such criticism annoying.

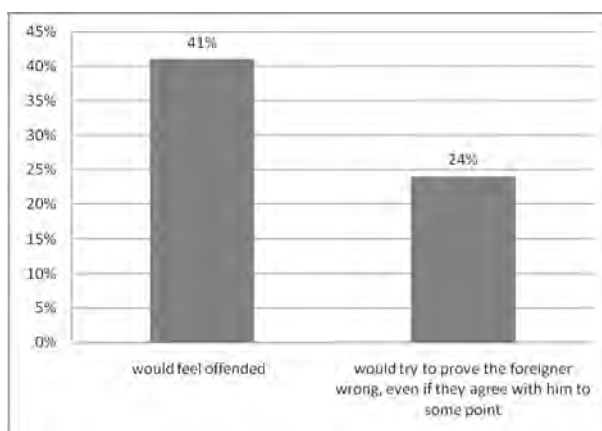
When it comes to foreigners criticising Poland 41% of the Polish respondents would feel offended, and 24% would try to prove the foreigners wrong even if they agree with some points of their criticism (see Fig. 2).

*How Poles react to foreigners' misrepresentations of facts from Polish history?*

The hypothesis was that Polish people are overly sensitive to the misrepresentation of the facts from Polish history. We have found that no one would take it as an as-



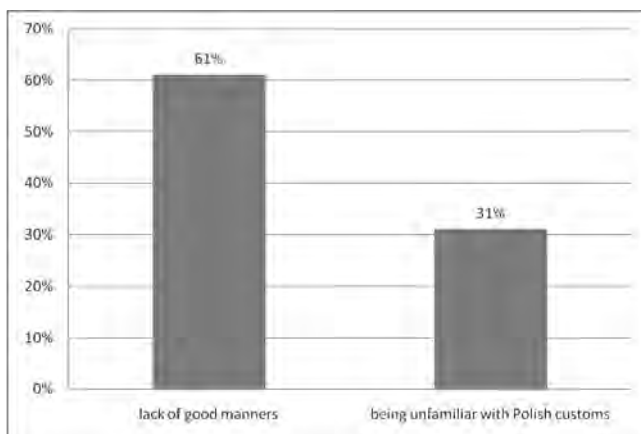
**Figure 1.** Do Poles criticise Poland?



**Figure 2.** Poles' reaction to foreigners criticising Poland.

sault, whereas 65% would patiently explain that the foreigner was wrong. It should be stressed that 83% of the respondents would not allow the misrepresentation of historical facts go unnoticed. Only in the case of 10% it would not trigger any kind of reaction.

As one of the respondents pointed out, the Polish people's reaction to the misrepresentation of historical facts may depend on the gravity of the mistake. She writes: "If a foreigner says, "Polish concentration camps," I'll definitely react explaining that the facts were different. However, I would not care if someone con-



**Figure 3.** Reasons that Polish people see behind faux pas by foreigners.

fused the name of Mieszko I's wife."<sup>2</sup> Mieszko I's wife played quite an important role in the history of Poland, but it does not seem necessary to know her name.

#### *Poles' attitude and reactions to faux pas made by foreigners*

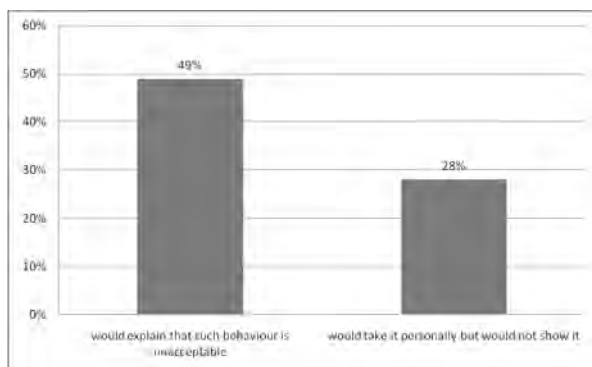
The results of the questionnaire for foreigners revealed that in their opinion Polish people attribute faux pas made by foreigners to their lack of knowledge about Polish customs. Foreigners assume that Polish people either do not care, or they feel offended, but they do not show it.

This assumption does not correspond to the results of the Polish questionnaire. 61% of the respondents attribute faux pas made by a foreigner to the lack of good manners, and 31% to a foreigner not being familiar with Polish customs (see Fig. 3). 49% would explain that such behaviour is unacceptable in Poland, and 28% would take it personally but they would not show it (see Fig. 4).

#### *Instances of behaviour considered impolite by the respondents*

The respondents were asked to list 10 instances of behaviour that Polish people consider impolite. Table 2 shows instances mentioned most frequently by the Poles and Table 3 those mentioned by the foreigners. Digits in the right hand column denote the number of respondents who included given behaviour in their lists.

<sup>2</sup> Mieszko I was the first historical ruler of Poland, and his wife Dobrawa, a Bohemian princess, is believed to have encouraged Mieszko to Christianize himself and his land in 966.



**Figure 4.** The reactions of Polish people towards faux pas made by foreigners.

**Table 2.** Instances of behaviour considered as impolite by the Poles.

Swearing, especially in public	76
Not giving up your seat for the elderly in public transport	46
Lack of respect for elderly people	26
Not letting ladies go first	24
Burping, smacking one's lips, slurping and other eating-related sounds	23
Drinking and getting drunk in public	22
Excessively loud behaviour in public places	21
Littering streets and bus stops	21
Spitting on the pavement	20
Loud conversations on the phone in public places	20

### 12.5. The Questionnaire for Polish People: The Evaluation of Ten Potentially Impolite Instances of Behaviour

In one of the questions respondents were asked to evaluate, on a scale from 1 to 5, ten statements concerning behaviour which might be considered impolite.

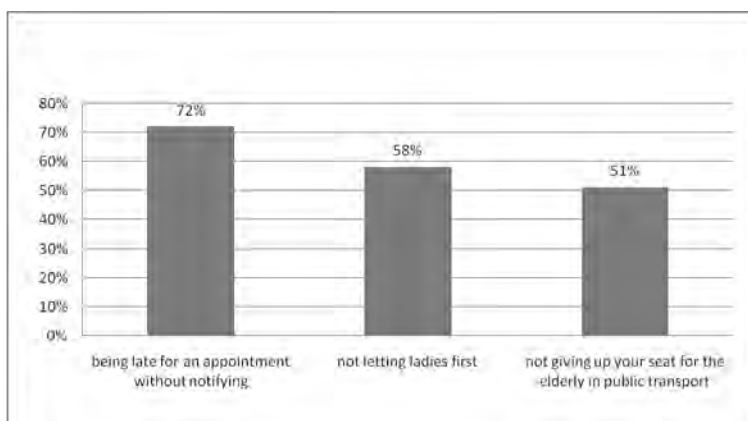
Three kinds of behaviour were evaluated as rude (5 on the scale) by a vast majority of the respondents, in all age groups. These were (see Fig. 5): being late for an appointment without notifying (72%), not letting ladies go first (58%), and not giving up your seat for the elderly in the public transport (51%).

Asking someone about their income, asking a woman about her age, and confusing professional titles while addressing people in official situations were considered tactless (4 on the scale) by the majority of respondents in all age groups.

However, significant discrepancies between age groups can be noticed in the evaluation of four instances of behaviour. Calling people by their first name unless given permission is thought to be rude by the youngest (16–20) and the oldest

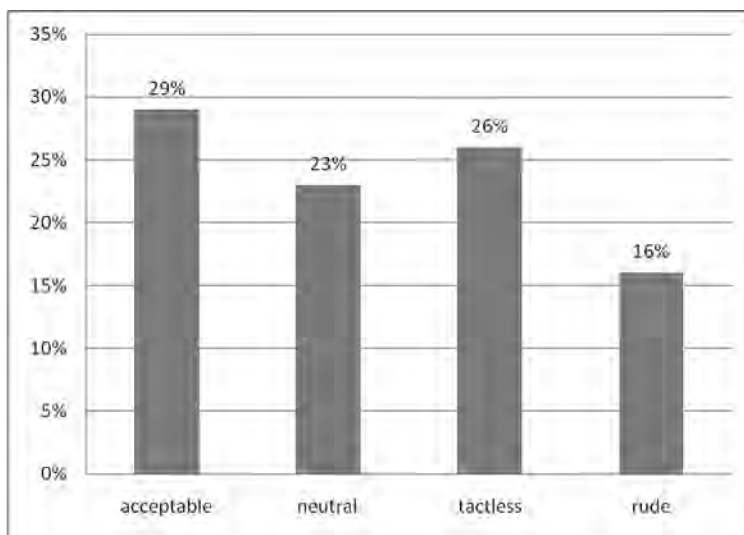
**Table 3.** Instances of behaviour considered impolite by the foreigners.

Not giving up your seat for the elderly in public transport	5
Speaking loudly in public	5
When people meet for the first time they call one another “Pani” [Ms] or “Pan” [Mr] if not it will be regarded as rude ( addressing elderly people in an informal way)	4
Not giving food to your guests / not showing hospitality for your guests	3
Talking negatively about the Catholic Church, the Pope	3
Not dressing up in a nice restaurant, or wedding etc.	3
Not accepting food you are offered when you visit someone	2
Being drunk in pubic places	2
Not opening the door for women	2
Being disrespectful towards a teacher or older person	2

**Figure 5.** Behaviours considered as rude in all age groups.

(50+) age groups, whereas the remaining two age groups evaluate it as acceptable. Certain degree of formality i.e. addressing others by using polite expressions like “Pan” (Mr) and “Pani” (Ms), is a cultural requirement in Poland, and the majority of respondents (35%) insist on observing it. However, it seems that for certain age groups it is not a priority. As some of the respondents pointed out their reaction to this kind of behaviour heavily depends on the situation and the people involved.

The situation in which a man greets a woman by a kiss on her hand is evaluated as tactless by the youngest age group, while the older groups consider it as either polite or acceptable. It seems, that for the younger generation, a kiss on the hand may be considered old fashioned and degrading for a woman. A shake hand is a popular way of greeting people among teenagers and young adults, but it must be emphasized that a woman should be the first to hold out her hand.



**Figure 6.** Not taking off one's shoes when walking into someone's house.

It is believed that not taking off one's shoes when walking into someone's house is considered impolite in Poland. However, it proves not so obvious for the respondents. 29% of the respondents considered it as acceptable, 23% as neutral, 28% as tactless, and only 16% as rude. There is also a discrepancy among age groups; in general, the youngest group considers it tactless, whereas the remaining ones accept it (see Fig. 6).

Shaking hands over a threshold or a table, which, according to a Polish superstition, brings bad luck, is evaluated as acceptable or neutral by 60% of the respondents and as tactless by 34%.

Generally, when it comes to the evaluation of the statements concerning behaviour, the youngest group has a tendency to pass more severe judgments than other groups (in 9 out of 10 cases).

## **12.6. The Experience of Polish People Regarding Their Interactions with Foreigners**

When asked how they would describe their experience regarding interactions with foreigners who come to Poland, the majority of the respondents (67%) judged these experiences as positive.

22% admitted to have very limited or no contacts with foreigners while only 4% described their experience as negative. Some (2%) mentioned language barrier as a serious obstacle which hinders contacts. A significant group of the respondents stress that the quality of interpersonal relations is determined by the personalities

of the individuals involved in them. One of the comments illustrates this standpoint well: “For me it is not important if someone is a foreigner or a Pole but rather what kind of person he or she is. Nationality does not play a role for me.”

As the results of the questionnaire for foreigners show, a significant number of them (76%) judge their interactions with Poles as positive, only one person as negative, and the remaining ones refrained from voicing their opinions.

## 12.7. Conclusions

It seems that a bi-directional perspective to teaching culture may contribute to cross-cultural understanding, as the work on the project broadened our knowledge about and understanding of our own culture. We hope that “knowing why representatives of the familiar culture and the foreign culture act the way they do will enable a deeper understanding of similarities and differences” (Larzen-Ostermark 2008: 536) between Polish and Ukrainian cultures.

We managed to compile a list of instances of behaviour unacceptable in Poland, which may serve as guidelines for foreigners coming to our country, thus helping them to avoid embarrassing situations. It appears to be important since, according to our findings, Polish people tend to attribute faux pas made by foreigners to their lack of good manners rather than to their lack of knowledge about Polish customs. Moreover, Poles may feel offended when a foreigner criticises Poland, although an overwhelming majority of Polish citizens do it among themselves. In spite of that, the general attitude of Polish people towards foreigners coming to Poland is positive; they try to be helpful and show hospitality.

## QUESTIONS AND TASKS

1. To what extent are good manners culturally specific? Are there some universal rules?
2. What can be done to avoid embarrassing situations in the intercultural communication?
3. Look at the list of unacceptable behaviours in Table 2 and 3. Which of them would be perceived as acceptable in your culture? Try to find some similarities and differences between your culture and the Polish one.
4. Think of some ways to raise general awareness of the fact that members of different cultures perceive standards of politeness differently?



## REFERENCES

- Durocher, D.** (2007). "Teaching sensitivity to cultural difference in the first-year foreign language classroom." *Foreign Language Annals*, 40, pp. 143–160.
- Larzen-Ostermark, E.** (2008). "The intercultural dimension in EFL-teaching: A study of conceptions among Finland-Swedish comprehensive school teachers." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 52, pp. 527–547.

## APPENDIX I: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR POLES

**Please fill in the questionnaire.**

**Sex:** M     F

**Age:** 16–20     21–30     31–50     over 51

**Please answer the questions from 1 to 9 in the order in which they appear. Thank you!**

1. Name 10 behaviours which are considered rude or impolite in Poland.
2. Do you tend to criticise Poland and Polish people?     YES     NO

**Please choose one answer.**

3. What is your reaction when another Polish person criticises Poland?
  - a. It is annoying
  - b. I do not care
  - c. It is something natural
  - d. Other: .....
4. If a foreigner makes a *faux pas*, you will attribute it to:
  - a. Their lack of good breeding
  - b. Their lack of knowledge about Polish customs
  - c. Their negative attitude toward you
  - d. Their negative attitude toward Poles in general
  - e. Other: .....
5. A foreigner behaves impolitely toward you. What is your reaction?
  - a. I feel offended
  - b. I do not care
  - c. I take it personally, but I do not show it
  - d. I explain that such behaviour is not acceptable in Poland
  - e. Other: .....
6. How would you describe your experience regarding interactions with foreigners who come to Poland? Please, illustrate with an example if possible.

7. Evaluate the following statements on the scale from 1 to 5 where: 1 = polite, 2 = acceptable, 3 = neutral, 4 = tactless, 5 = rude.
- A person whom you meet for the first time calls you by your first name without being given permission.
  - Someone asks you about your income.
  - A younger person does not give up his/her seat for an elderly person in a public transport.
  - A man greets a woman by a kiss on her hand.
  - Your guests do not take off their shoes when walking into your house.
  - Shaking hands over a threshold or a table.
  - Asking a woman about her age.
  - Someone is going to be late for an appointment and does not inform you about the fact.
  - A man does not let a woman first.
  - Confusing professional titles while addressing people in official situations.
8. What is your reaction when a foreigner criticises Poland or Polish people?
- When I agree, I join in.
  - I do not care.
  - I feel offended and explain that s/he is wrong.
  - I try to prove the foreigner wrong even if I agree with him/her to some extent.
  - Other: .....
9. A foreigner misrepresents facts from Polish history. What is your reaction?
- It is not an issue for me. I ignore his/her mistakes.
  - I feel offended and try to prove him/her wrong.
  - I take it as an assault.
  - I patiently explain that s/he is wrong.
  - Other: .....

## APPENDIX II: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FOREIGNERS

**Please fill in the questionnaire. Thank you for your participation.**

Where are you from? .....

- What is considered as rude or impolite behaviour in Poland? Name 10 items.

**Please choose one answer.**

- If you make a *faux pas*, Polish people will attribute it to:
  - Your lack of good breeding
  - Your lack of knowledge about Polish customs
  - Your negative attitude towards a particular person

- d. Your negative attitude towards Poles in general
  - e. Other: .....
3. What is the most common reaction of the Polish people to a *faux pas* made by a foreigner?
- a. They feel offended
  - b. They do not care
  - c. They take it personally but they do not show it
  - d. They explain that such a behaviour is not acceptable in Poland
  - e. Other: .....
4. Do you recall any embarrassing situation that resulted from your lack of knowledge concerning Polish customs? Please describe it.
5. How would you generally describe your experiences with Poles?
- a. Positive
  - b. Negative